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One of the most thrilling mediums by which to receive themes and stories from the Ancient World is heavy metal music. Believe it or not, Classical Antiquity and heavy metal music intersect quite often, and indeed, some of the magna opera of the genre find themselves conceptually rooted in antiquity. “Powerslave” and “Alexander the Great,” for example, are two of the most popular and instantly recognizable cuts from the legendary Iron Maiden from their early-to-mid 80s albums. American power metal titans Manowar open their album *The Triumph of Steel* (1992) with a song called “Achilles, Agony, and Ecstasy in Eight Parts,” a 28-minute rock operetta on the arc of Achilles as told in Homer’s *Iliad*. Though, among the many bands in metal’s gigantic, all-encompassing, and ever-fertile scene, one group of rip-roaring misfits towers above the rest in its passion for and dedication to telling the stories from the Ancient Mediterranean world: Nile. Based in Greenville, South Carolina and Athens, Greece, Nile is a death metal band whose music almost exclusively concerns the history, mythology, and culture of Ancient Egypt. Formed in 1993 by guitarist, backing vocalist, and main songwriter Karl Sanders, the band owes its success and originality to their architect’s passions for extreme metal guitar and Ancient Egypt.

In order to understand what makes Nile’s sound and conceptual basis unique, it is important to understand the greater genre which the band’s sound falls into. Nile is considered “technical death metal.” Technical death metal (often shortened to “tech death”) stands out from other subgenres of metal because of the blistering intricacy of the instrumentation, particularly for the guitars and drums. The “death” part of “tech death” comes from the vocal style, involves abrasive, guttural growls and spine-chilling screams more commonly associated with one’s sleep

paralysis demon than a human singer. Moreover, to go with the demands of the technicality of the guitar playing inherent to death metal, there is a distinctly “ugly” sound to the note choice. In this genre, dissonance and non-conformity to diatonic (Major or Minor) scales is celebrated and encouraged. Interestingly, some people argue that, in terms of its difficulty and freeform music theory foundation, death metal and jazz share many similarities. In Nile’s case specifically, Karl Sanders and the other guitarists in the band’s history, add an extra ingredient to their metal recipe: Near-Eastern melodicism. The juxtaposition of chromatic (meaning notes that are right next to each other not conforming to a specific scale) riffs and mesmerizing Arabian melodies allow Nile to tap into two kinds of musicality most suited for sounding “evil.”

Lastly, in terms of lyricism, death metal songs often talk about the more repulsive, disgusting sides of the human experience. This comes in a variety of forms, though most commonly this entails lyrics that express a nihilistic, misanthropic perspective on humankind as a whole, and/or lyrics that are graphically (and sometimes nauseatingly) violent and gory. Some of the expressions of the gruesome nature of humankind most readily accessible to metal musicians are those of war and conquest. Many of Nile’s songs talk about wars, battles, and military atrocities committed in Ancient Egypt. For instance, Nile wrote a song for their 2015 album *What Should Not Be Unearthed* called “In the Name of Amun.” The lyrics give a grisly, and remarkably detailed retelling of the ancient battle of Megiddo. “Black Seeds of Vengeance,” the title track of Nile’s much renowned second album from 2000 talks about the acts terrorism and desecration the Amalachites inflicted upon Egyptian peoples.

Among the more unique topics explored in Nile’s discography is the lyrical content of their song “Iskander D’hul Karnon.” This song is the closing track of the band’s 2009 album *Those Whom the Gods Detest*. Sanders’ lyrics in this song detail the conquests of Alexander the

Great in the 4th Century BC. Interestingly, this song features both Hellenistic and Quranic depictions of the Macedonian ruler; “Iskander” in the title is the Arabic version of Alexander. What makes this song stand out from other songs in Nile’s catalogue, and certainly from the average death metal song is the way in which the lyrics engage in cultural syncretism. For example, the first verse begins by describing Alexander/Iskander as an “idolator pagan” and the “possessor of the horns of Ammon,” referring, of course, to Alexander’s stop in Egypt to visit the temple of Amon-Ra. The first half of verse 1 concludes by giving Alexander the epithet “conqueror of both the rising and setting of the sun,” a very Ancient Mediterranean way of praising Alexander for the extent of his dominion. However, later on in the song, we are told that “the prophet himself [Muhammad] had knowledge of him || revealed at the cave of Mecca.” The two perspectives merge for the couplet “the hosts of Gog and Magog, hordes of the fiercest of creatures shall be unchained.” Here, the inhabitants of Gog and Magog - two Ancient Middle Eastern as they are known in various Abrahamic texts are described both as hellish creatures of Armageddon, and as barbarians much like how Greco-Roman peoples would have perceived them.

Some of Sanders’ poeticization of the character of Alexander reminds the reader of how Ancient Greek historians would have written about him. Plutarch establishes that Alexander’s destiny as a great king and warlord was apparent from the time he was born, as he was a direct descendant of Heracles on his father’s side, and of Aeacus and Neoptolemus on his mother’s side, a fact which was “agreed by all hands.” The grand, awe-inspiring monikers given to Alexander at the start of the verses in “Iskander D’hul Karnon” by Nile fit very well with Plutarch’s description of Alexander almost having been a demigod amongst men.

From a musical standpoint, “Iskander D’hul Karnon” stands out to me for its epic-sounding, eerie guitar passages. The song see-saws between relentless, fast-paced riffs and shambling, apocalyptic passages with big blaring chords. In a way, the distinct, yet complementary style of guitar riffs and drumming symbolize the distinct, yet complementary presentations of the Macedonian conqueror between the Greek and Arabic cultures. The machine-gun-esque riffs evoke images of the Companion Cavalry thundering down the arid plains of Gaugamela, ready to stampede and demolish the forces of Darius III, while the slower, more ominous sections evoke images of the gates of hell - or perhaps the Gate of Alexander - opening. And, more broadly in terms of the instrumentation of the genre, death metal stands out among other genres of metal for its particularly vicious rhythm guitar patterns. The combination of heavily palm-muted chords and single-note riffs, highly compressed distortion dialed into the amplifiers, and the relentless blast beat, double-bass drumming come together to form an ensemble of melodic assault weapons firing on all cylinders. This style of instrumentation, which flies directly and vehemently in the face of the concept of “easy listening,” is perfect to draw the listener into the atmosphere of warfare, chaos, and destruction depicted in the lyrics.

By encasing the story told in the lyrics in such aggressive music, the members of Nile bring out the spirit of their band’s reception of Alexander. The candid, humanizing tone at the core of the vicious whirlwind of the death metal medium echoes the spirit of much of the work of contemporary scholarly reception done in our own discipline. The thunderous drums, biting explicit lyrics, and the rapid-fire guitar work merely immerses the listener in the contrasting sides of the presentation.

Nile’s existence and 25-year-long discography serves as a testament to the intellectual richness which the heavy metal genre possesses. Oftentimes, many people who are not as

familiar with the genre consider the extent of lyricism and thematics in heavy metal confined to a handful of trite topics: hell, fire, Satan, death, war, and destruction, all of which being communicated in juvenile, brutish fashion. While the themes above are certainly prevalent and popular in metal songwriting, the richness of the genre's lyricism transcends these stereotypes by an astonishing amount. Yes, "Iskander D'hul Karnon" talks about the gates of hell being opened, and that the "earth shall be laid waste" upon Iskander/Alexander's invasion. However, the nuances of the description of Alexander the Great highlights the passion band-leader Karl Sanders feels for the Ancient World. He did an excellent job weaving the contrasting perspectives of Alexander - one being of a triumphant Hellenistic warrior who ambitiously conquered East and West, and the other a demonic, ruthless creature from hell who was a harbinger of utter apocalypse.